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ABSTRACT

In "Amusing Ourselves to Death," Neil Postman's nightmare is that the content of education will come to be determined by what can be turned into entertainment. Where does effective pedagogy end and mere entertainment begin? Currently, education is in a period of transition between dominant media, moving away from print and toward electronic. Generations of television-raised students who do not read for enjoyment, who cannot spell, and who seem to have shorter attention spans, are filling classrooms. The new cognitive style fostered by electronic media could be called "empathy at a distance." People get excited about things that they cannot do anything about. College faculty trained in the ways and skills of print media, are told to teach students something. And with "market forces" affecting colleges more and more, there is pressure on faculty to keep the "customers" happy. For the television generations, school is an experience of sensory deprivation. By the time they become adults, they will be restless and unsatisfied, without quite understanding why. In class, the students' attention can be held for 15 or 20 minutes with a lecture, but then it is time for something new--it can be a handout, a video, a student report, or a small group exercise. Several themes can be kept going at once, as in a variety show. However, on the positive side students are found to be still curious and responsive to ideas, abstractions, and issues that they do not see on television. This is perhaps the best hope for educating them. (NKA)

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Entertainment as/in Education:

Neil Postman's Nightmare Come True,

or an Opportunity for Growth?

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My theme today is entertainment in education. This is a trend which I have encountered personally, but which is widespread enough to have given birth to some new words: edutainment and infotainment.

In my title I refer to Neil Postman's nightmare. This nightmare, as recounted in Chapter 10 of Amusing Ourselves to Death, is that the content of education will come to be determined by what is able to be turned into entertainment. Thus the content of education will be filled with subjects which are televisable, since that will be the main criterion for inclusion.

I must confess I have participated in this trend toward entertainment in education, and with very mixed feelings. Where does effective pedagogy end, and mere entertainment begin? When am I teaching something useful, and when am I just slacking off and showing videos? How do I jolt students out of habits of passivity when watching television, and try to instill some critical viewing skills? I am going to discuss these today, and I hope to be able to get some input from you, my studio audience....a little later in the show.

First, I'd like to set the context with a bit of medium theory, as Joshua Meyrowitz calls it, the conceptualization of history as divided into periods of orality, literacy, and electronic media. This provides us with a convenient conceptualization of our current situation in education--we are in a period of transition between dominant media, moving away from print and toward electronic.

Medium theory says that certain cognitive habits are associated with different media. Our culture and educational system require the cognitive habits related to print, in particular the discipline of rationality in discourse, logic in argument, and abstraction in conceptualization. As Ph.D.'s or aspiring Ph.D.'s, we are thoroughly "schooled" in these cognitive habits and tend to identify meaningful education with them.

What we see in our students, increasingly over time, is an erosion of these literate-based skills. From the perspective of print literacy, it looks like a decline if not a disaster. Generations of television-raised students are filling our classrooms who do not read for enjoyment, who cannot spell, and who seem to have shorter attention spans.

We are facing as well a different cognitive style, one more suited to the fast-moving visual world of television and video games. No longer can we "lecture" for a 50-minute period, dispensing wit and wisdom, and expect to hold the attention of our students. No longer can we say, "read this book and write me a paper on it," we must provide much more structure and a lot of hints about where to look and what to look for.

Neil Postman, in Amusing Ourselves to Death, seems to feel that the cognitive style encouraged by television is fundamentally nihilism: irrational, non-sequential, emotional yet vapid. There is much validity to this insight. Yet I notice that my students do learn things from television,

and even acquire a somewhat sophisticated world-view--even though that world-view is fundamentally flawed, in my opinion, based as it is on advertisements and sound bites.

In an article in Critical Studies in Mass Communication, Lance Haynes and I termed the new cognitive style fostered by electronic media as "empathy at a distance". Television and other electric media involve our emotions, even as they bring us information from far away. The result is that we know a lot and get excited about things that we cannot do anything about. We live lives of non-involved involvement. We pick up bits and pieces of behavior, and opinions, from the images that parade before us in such profusion, but we do not really know much about the real people behind the images.

Meanwhile here we are, trained in the ways and skills of print media, being told to teach them something. And of course with "market forces" affecting colleges more and more, there is a not-so-subtle pressure to keep the customers happy. In addition, untenured faculty members are increasingly being rated on student evaluations of teaching. I think this is on the whole a good practice, although it can be overdone. However, pressures toward getting tenure also lead to strong incentives to keep the students happy.

And so what to do? We have a clash of cognitive styles. We cannot fall back on simple authoritarian dictates. We need to persuade our students that we have important things to teach, that are worth the effort for them to learn. And we need to be, dare I say it, somewhat entertaining in the classroom.

I'm speaking in broad generalizations here, I hope you'll make allowances for that in this short presentation. But I am also speaking from personal experience. I have become convinced, from reading student evaluations, that even the "good" students, who read and write well, have a lower tolerance for lecture, or even for sustained discourse on one subject, than college students did back in the '60's when I was in college.

For the television generations, school is an experience of sensory deprivation. And we know that sensory deprivation brings about pain and disorientation, ultimately leading to hallucination. By the time they get to college, our students have had to endure deprivation like my generation cannot really imagine. And this is a terrible tragedy. Important knowledge is being lost, and our students are suffering when no one wished to inflict that punishment on them.

And I suspect an even greater tragedy awaits the television generations--they are going to find themselves, and anyone they choose to spend their time with--boring. There is no way any one person can compete with the television for constant new input and entertainment. Once their nervous systems are habituated to the levels of television input, no mere mortal will be satisfactory for long. I am afraid the television gererations will be incredibly restless and unsatisfied, without quite understanding why.

I see the beginnings of this process in my classes. And so I would like to bring the discussion back down to the specifics of teaching. And in a moment I'd like to hear from

you, on any of these issues I've raised in my whirlwind tour.

I have found, in teaching a class, that for the first fifteen, twenty, or even twenty-five minutes, I can hold the students' attention to a topic of my choice. I can lecture a little bit, write on the blackboard and get questions and get discussions going--all the familiar classroom routines we know and love. But at a certain point, we hit "the wall". That's how I have come to think of it, hitting the wall. I can see it in the body language of the class, the yawns, the restlessness, the loss of responsiveness. I expect many of you know what I am talking about. When you hit the wall, it's time for something new.

This could be a handout, preferably not just text, but something with a visual they can react to. It could be a video, suitably introduced so they will hopefully watch it critically and be able to discuss it. It could be a student report on something, although they are often deadly. It could be breaking up students into groups, and giving them some group tasks to perform.

One thing I've found is you can keep several themes going in a course at the same time--you do not need to be talking about exactly the same thing all period long. Think of it like a variety show--discuss a book in the first part of the class, watch a video totally unrelated to the book, but related to some other course theme, in the next part. The linear thinking that is related to print media need not govern our class structures any more.

I will say, on the positive side, I have found my students are interested in ideas. They sense, somehow, that there is a layer of thought and culture which they are missing out on. They are still curious and responsive to ideas, abstractions, and issues that they do not see on television. This is perhaps our best hope for educating them, and we should never lose sight of this beacon.

However, on the negative side, we must be paying more attention to the packaging of ideas, we must be more in the business of entertainment if we want to communicate effectively. It is our job to see that we do not surrender to glitzy entertainment packages, and insist on instilling critical thinking and writing skills, and presenting our students with challenging ideas to which we demand a response.

But we are going to be walking that line between education and entertainment for a long time. Some of us may not have reached that line yet, some of us may be way over it. I think most of us will inhabit an increasing gray area, and try to insist on the education part of "edutainment" while nervously looking over our shoulders at the next blockbuster movie with educational tie-ins that we will soon have to be dealing with.

I'm thinking here of the movie Jurassic Park and all those little kids learning about dinosaurs--education as a marketing ploy. We have to be careful we don't become dinosaurs ourselves.

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